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## The American retreat into the Western Hemisphere

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### Abstract:

Latin America embodies a space united by language, yet rich and diverse, to which the second Trump administration has restored its prominence. The rise of China in the region deserves mention. This occurs within a context of increased strategic confrontation with the United States. The US once controlled Ibero-America, leaving it under the lee of its global power. The establishment of new actors in this territory demonstrates a loss of power.

This is why President Trump's second term placed it at the top of his political agenda. However, 21st-century Ibero-America, with its flaws and shortcomings, boasts levels of institutional, social, and economic development that it lacked in the 19th century, which may make the guiding role it seeks to assume more demanding. In any case, the result is that Ibero-America has re-entered the geopolitics of the 21st century.

### Keywords:

Latin America, United States, China, geopolitics, emigration, religion, globalisation.

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## Geopolitics of the Mediterranean and the Caribbean<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the American Mediterranean was developed by Alexander von Humboldt. This concept encompasses the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea and separates North America from South America. The area covers 5,257,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

Like the Mediterranean Sea, it brings together territories that are highly diverse in terms of culture, ethnicity and development, giving rise to north-south flows. It is therefore an area of coexistence, interaction and cultural and ethnic mixing that has developed a shared culture, and this, despite being a sea open to the Atlantic and, like a funnel, the gateway to the Pacific: the Panama Canal.

Shortly after the Discovery, the political centre of the West shifted to this new Mediterranean. Control was exercised with limited resources, through the control of key maritime nodes and stopover ports. With this system, the Amazon region and control of the Strait of Magellan preserved Spain's dominance of the Pacific Ocean until practically the 19th century.

From this nucleus, the Hispanicisation of the continent took place, from north to south, driven by civil society, whilst the State looked towards Flanders and Europe. Following the process of independence, the *hinterland* of these enclaves would, on more than a few occasions, form the nucleus of the new states. The spread of the Spanish language amongst the indigenous population then occurred to promote national cohesion.

The Caribbean was thus the gateway to the Spanish conquest, the barrier that prevented other European countries from reaching the New World, and its exit point. Disputes, much like the missile crisis, arose in its vicinity and over access to it. Spain's defeat in Cuba transformed the United States, which was already a continental power, into a maritime power as well and, as a result of this convergence, into a global power that immediately seized control of the hemisphere as the first manifestation of its dominance.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information: MARQUINA BARRIOS, Antonio and AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico. 'The geopolitics of maritime and terrestrial space. "Mediterraneans" and projections', [Revista UNISCI / UNISCI Journal, no. 68 \(May 2025\). 2025](#), pp. 21–72. ISSN-e 2386-9453 [issue dedicated to *Global Geopolitical Transition: Connectivity, Competition and Fragmentation*].

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The United States' interest in the region is clear. Spykman argued that 'Mediterranean America is like a zone in which US supremacy cannot be questioned. For all intents and purposes, it is an enclosed sea whose keys belong to the United States'.

Indeed, its desire for total control over the region is today manifested in measures such as the maintenance of the embargo on Cuba, sanctions and the political isolation of Venezuela, and, finally, intervention in the old style of gunboat diplomacy, or by resorting to old formulas adapted to the regional level, such as the idea of the 'axis of evil', referring to the Latin American context and comprising Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua as revisionist powers and members of the ALBA strategic alliance, which emerged in response to the US-sponsored FTAA, with which it is in confrontation and which it seeks to serve, propose or present as the gateway for the United States' global geopolitical rivals such as China, Iran or Russia.

Cuba's isolation following Venezuela's forced realignment—brought about by Maduro's capture and the cessation of oil supplies from Mexico—has compelled negotiations with the United States.

But the keystone and geopolitical centre of this sea lies in the Panama Canal. Due to the overextension that burdens potential alternative routes, it is not only a maritime *chokepoint*—around 6% of global traffic passes through it, and its growth is expected to rise in line with the intensification of trade with the Asia-Pacific region—but, locally, it serves as a link between the two coasts of the United States.

For this reason, the US supported Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903, maintaining strict control from its definitive commissioning in 1914 until its full handover in 1990, following the Carter-Torrijos agreements of 1977. The growth in global trade prompted its expansion in 2016, but it had to contend with a shortage of fresh water to operate its locks, caused by a prolonged drought in 2024. This circumstance limited the excess capacity it had been equipped with.

In this context, Panama became the first Latin American country to join the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017. Its accession was followed by those of the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras. Furthermore, in recent years, Chinese shipping traffic has come to account for nearly 25% of the total, whilst companies allegedly

controlled by China (such as the Hong Kong-based CK Hutchinson) have been taking over a significant number of ports in the region.

President Trump's emphasis on this strategic chokepoint also ties in with his stance in favour of *fracking*, given that the location of the shale gas deposits that this technology enables to be exploited converges geographically in the Gulf of Mexico, which, let us recall, the US president also intends to rename the Gulf of America, from where they could be transported—and for which loading stations are already in place—to the West Coast, as well as to the Asia-Pacific region.

The US response to this geopolitical dilemma has been, initially, to force Panama's exit from the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the takeover—by a prominent US investment fund and one of the world's leading shipping companies—of the management of the surrounding ports as part of an even broader operation extending to as many as 23 countries.

This ensures the connection between the country's east and west coasts, the transport of *fracking* hydrocarbons, and maintains its dominance over China, at the cost of increased expenses for ships using the canal. For the time being, a commercial solution has been found to a geopolitical problem. It should not be overlooked that President Trump's ambitions regarding the Panama Canal are linked, simultaneously, to the current US administration's attempt to halt the process of globalisation and, at the same time, serve to contain China's rise in the region, limiting its access to the continent's Atlantic coasts. The intervention in Venezuela is a further step forward in this regard.

This initial drive represents a determined attempt to halt the geopolitical decline of the United States. The lack of control over Central America and the Caribbean, which constitute an immediate and vital territory, can be seen as evidence of a loss of power and as a sign of a shift in the world order. The geopolitical game in Central America and the Caribbean, including Mexico, is therefore only just beginning.

### **The idea of America and the presumption of hegemony**

The independence and birth of the United States marked the emergence of a new political regime that cast the country as a beacon on a hilltop, setting it on a missionary purpose.

Added to this were the Protestant ethic and the Calvinist conception of redemption through work, which stems from the discourse of the Founding Fathers<sup>2</sup>.

The result of this combination of ideas would be a philosophical-moral model based on freedom and the superiority of its political-economic system, which would endow the United States' actions with a kind of 'hegemonic presumption'. This is the 'idea of America'.

This legitimised not only a right to expansion—which was also a necessity, to meet the demand for raw materials and markets arising from the country's development—but also a responsibility towards the rest of the continent, which the United States claimed exclusively and which it would begin to exercise in practice following its industrial development as a 'right in its own right and in its entirety'<sup>3</sup>.

As early as 1783—when the United States occupied an area of less than 30% of its current size—the Count of Aranda had already sensed the danger that this burgeoning nation posed to Spanish possessions. When the country acquired Louisiana and gained access to the Mississippi River, it exceeded the colonial geographical framework, directly threatening Spain. As a result, in 1823, President James Monroe promulgated a doctrine denying European powers the right to intervene in the American continent. This is the original idea of the existence of a 'Western Hemisphere', that is, a distinct and differentiated space, characterised by the convergence of interests, values and perceptions, from which common policies for the continent are derived.

Paradoxically, this also paved the way for US neocolonial intervention on the continent; and it is an idea that was supported by the repeated development of concepts serving both to provide policies with a doctrinal basis for the region and to normalise them. These would constitute the pedagogical, explanatory and justificatory corpus for policies whose underlying reasons are hidden and economic in nature.

Thus, the Polk Administration, in the second half of the 1840s, produced the idea of 'manifest destiny', a natural result of a sense of superiority over the countries of the South, which would be the object of a 'special interest'. This, with an industrialised North America, would lead, by the end of the 19th century, to President Theodore Roosevelt's

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<sup>2</sup> PALOMARES LERMA, Gustavo. *Theory and Concept of International Relations*. UNED, 1994, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

‘Big Stick’ policy, which embodied the conceptualisation of Admiral Mahan’s thinking. We are looking at a policy of power: the ‘Roosevelt Corollary’. And President Taft went further with his concept of ‘special interest’, which underpinned an idea of ‘racial superiority’.

Subsequently, these ideas, combined with President Wilson’s idealism, turned the US into the guardian of the continent’s ‘political spirit’, which translated into ‘the raising of awareness among Latin Americans and their governments regarding the need for dual consent—that expressed by the will of the people and that expressed by the United States—but also into a growth in economic relations and development<sup>4</sup>.

Pan-Americanism can be seen as a US project to dominate all hemispheric relations according to its own understanding of the economy, politics, culture and security<sup>5</sup>. But it also fostered a predatory spirit.

The Good Neighbour Policy promoted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt marked a complete shift from previous practices. Launched in the midst of the Great Depression, it essentially promoted non-interference in internal affairs, whilst encouraging trade and bilateral treaties with neighbouring countries.

The Cold War would bring Latin America into the US sphere of influence, as advocated by the Kennan Doctrine, which, in response to the USSR’s attempts to destabilise the continent, called for absolute control over Central America and the Caribbean on grounds of national security. Thus, the North-South divide was compounded by an East-West dimension. In political terms, the approach favoured the use of force and cooperation; we are thus faced with a policy with a common basis for the whole of Latin America.

This reinforced the need to cooperate with Latin American governments and strengthened the role of US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) and, in particular, that of the School of the Americas, which operated in Panama between 1946 and 1984. More than 60,000 military personnel and police officers passed through its ranks; its existence became associated with human rights violations during the era of Latin American military dictatorships<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 182–184.

<sup>5</sup> CORREA HENAO, Juan David. ‘Pan-Americanism *versus* Latin Americanism: geopolitical and civilisational tension’, *Analecta Política*, vol. 10, no. 19, 2020, pp. 56–76.

<sup>6</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José María. ‘Introduction’, in Various Authors, *Security and Defence in Ibero-America: Current Possibilities for Cooperation*. CESEDEN, November 2007, p. 6.

To understand the primacy of the military, it is worth noting that USSOUTHCOM, based in Miami and created to protect the Panama Canal, has a greater presence in the region than any other US administration and has more staff dedicated to Latin American affairs than the Departments of Commerce, State and the Treasury combined<sup>7</sup>. The creation of the Fourth Fleet in 2018, during the first Trump administration, marked, in a sense, its revitalisation.

In this vein, the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) was signed in 1947, the first of its kind following the Second World War. In 1948, the Organisation of American States (OAS) was established, set up during this era of ideological conflict to guarantee cohesion and ensure political uniformity. From 1960 onwards, the Pentagon sought to strengthen cooperation with Latin America, and various forums for consultation and military training were established<sup>8</sup>. In this atmosphere of *realpolitik*, President Kennedy, through the Alliance for Progress programme, sought to cooperate on Latin American economic and social development, which was also part of a counter-insurgency strategy. However, its results were limited, among other reasons, because it was launched just one year before his assassination.

In subsequent administrations, the policies championed by Kissinger focused on an order based on US authority, democratisation and regional development, with the aim of preemptively preventing any potential spread of revolution. But operations were also launched—such as the notorious ‘Operation Condor’—which, in the repression of insurgent movements, affected multiple countries in the Global South and continued across various administrations.

Under the Reagan administration, the parameters of the national interest and the Kennan doctrine were once again intensified, leading to an increase in conflict, particularly in Central America. In a famous speech, the president noted that ‘Central America is much closer to the United States than many of the troubled places in the world that concern

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<sup>7</sup> KERN, Soren. ‘What are the United States’ interests in Latin America?’, *Elcano Royal Institute*. 19 December 2005. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/cuales-son-los-intereses-de-estados-unidos-en-latinoamerica-ari/>

<sup>8</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José María. In Various Authors, *Security and Defence in Ibero-America: Current Possibilities for Cooperation*. CESEDEN, November 2007, p. 26.

us... El Salvador is closer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts; Nicaragua is as close to Miami, San Antonio, San Diego and Tucson as those cities are to Washington<sup>9</sup>.

The Cold War thus spread to the region in the 1980s in the form of *proxy* conflicts, which continued throughout the 1990s with deadly consequences. Hundreds of thousands of people died, whether at the hands of left-wing guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala or the Contras, or the anti-Sandinistas in Nicaragua, funded by one bloc or the other. This contributed to the establishment of a culture of death in the region.

The armed conflicts in Central America became intertwined with drug trafficking, which was redirecting its routes towards the United States: the territory fell into the hands of the armed forces, institutions of control and justice were rendered ineffective, violence imposed an order founded on fear, and the 'ideological cause' served to justify any excess<sup>10</sup>. The United States also used the justification offered by the 'fight against drug trafficking' to increase its geopolitical influence in the region.

This period of singular lawlessness—during which, for example, the Iran-Contra affair took place—was exploited by the Colombian drug trade to reposition itself, an episode depicted in films such as *American Made*. Civil conflicts brought with them a rise in crime. For organised crime, violence is a last resort, as its public impact runs counter to the discretion it seeks. The armed conflict provided an ideal scenario: violence not associated with crime, within a context of an institutionally weakened state, which also served to conceal it.

The result is that crime in Central America now bears the hallmarks of a pandemic. The vulnerability of borders, and the institutional and administrative limitations of some states, explain the growth of organised crime in the region, fuelled by an explosive cocktail of drug trafficking, arms and gangs. As a result, it is estimated that, in 2011, 90% of the cocaine reaching the US came via the Central American corridor, leaving approximately €5.3 billion in illegal profits in the region. This would amount to 5% of the regional GDP.

Furthermore, policies towards Latin America were inconsistent and even contradicted US actions on the global stage. This was the case with the Falklands conflict, an area where

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<sup>9</sup> PALOMARES LERMA, Gustavo. *Op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> VILLEGAS HERRERA, César. 'The Blurred Boundaries of the Illicit Economy: Impacts of Illicit Drug Trafficking on Legal Economic Flows in Central America', in Various Authors, *Rethinking Illicit Drug Trafficking in Central America: A Social Science Approach*. FLACSO, 2020.



no US interest was apparent and in which the US opted for its special relationship with the United Kingdom, to the detriment of the OAS and the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR). As a result, the legitimacy of the TIAR was seriously undermined.

We can conclude that, during the Cold War, Latin America was a secondary theatre of confrontation between blocs, which justified highly interventionist policies and even direct action. These policies, despite affecting numerous Latin American states, were decided outside of them and without their involvement. This fact has been used by the United States' geopolitical rivals to fuel a mistrust that remains prevalent and is now spreading to all Western democracies<sup>11</sup>.

### **Hemispheric policy after the end of the Cold War and up to the second Trump administration**

The end of the Cold War pushed ideological issues into the background, which, in turn, reduced interference in the political life of these countries. As a result—although there have been coups d'état in Honduras, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, Haiti, Ecuador and Bolivia since 2010—there has been progress in the democratic quality of the region's states, where there has been a very healthy alternation of power within the right-left political spectrum, which we hope will serve to strengthen state institutions, the rule of law and democracy. This has been the case in Chile, Ecuador, Argentina and Brazil.

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<sup>11</sup> KERN, Soren. *Op. cit.*

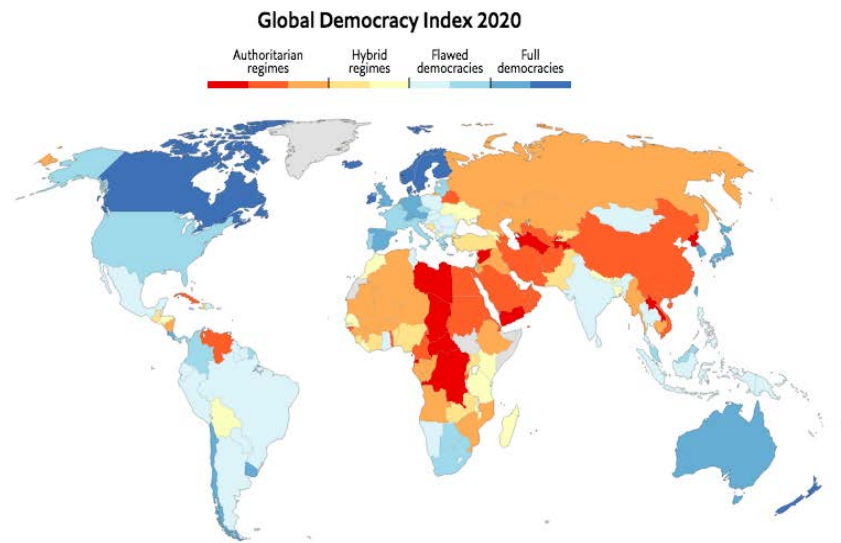


Figure. Global Democracy Index 2020.

Source: *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/02/02/global-democracy-has-a-very-bad-year>

This, moreover, also led to Latin America losing its geopolitical significance: the region was not the venue for resolving the major issues on the international agenda, nor was it the epicentre of the power struggle between the major geopolitical players. Nevertheless, it remained in the shadow of the United States, given the latter's geographical position as regional leader. All the same, the level of geopolitical asymmetry persisted: the United States is more important to any country in the Western Hemisphere than any nation could ever be to it<sup>12</sup>. And this was the case even when, in a return to the past, old formulas were applied on a regional scale. Thus, it is worth noting that during the first Trump administration, the concept of the 'axis of evil' was revived, referring to the Latin American context and comprising Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua.

However, the 2023 Latinobarómetro reported a decline in democratic quality in Latin America within the 'third wave' of democratisation sweeping the region. This was reflected in low support for democracy, increasing indifference towards the type of regime, a preference for and attitudes in favour of authoritarianism, and a collapse in government performance and the image of political parties. Democracy in several countries is in a critical state, whilst others no longer have it.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The Latinobarómetro 2023 also highlighted the weakness of the elites. It noted that 21 presidents have been convicted of corruption, a further 20 have not completed their terms of office, and there are presidents who forced their way into remaining in power by breaking re-election rules. A third of the presidents elected since the transition began have flouted the rules of democracy. Nor were instances of personality cults, which ended up overshadowing political parties, uncommon. This weakness led to the fragmentation of the party system, causing its image and legitimacy to plummet.

The United States, whilst—as we have seen—it has maintained control over the region, has progressively scaled back its commitment to the continent to levels that are clearly defined and measurable in terms of security. Moreover, this loss of importance following the end of the Cold War was so significant and abrupt that the US redirected a large part of the economic aid it provided to Latin America towards the reconstruction of Eastern Europe. This evident loss of influence on the continent meant that the US could no longer count on Pan-American solidarity for its foreign policy. Furthermore, given that there is no vacuum in international relations, the space vacated by the US in the region was filled by other powers, particularly China.

This also explains the failure of the TIAR, particularly when compared with NATO. It should be borne in mind that both treaties were signed at virtually the same time. However, the North Atlantic Treaty has allowed Europe to benefit from the protective umbrella provided by the United States and has been accompanied by economic support. This has not been the case with the TIAR in Latin America<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, in 2002 Mexico withdrew from the TIAR and in 2012 the ALBA countries followed suit. In 2017, Venezuela withdrew from the OAS, from which Cuba had already been expelled in 1962 and to which it rejoined in 2009, although it did not participate in meetings.

The case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is paradigmatic and serves as a good example for gauging the current situation. A few weeks earlier, the President of Argentina and his counterpart in Brazil travelled to Moscow. Mexico—the major beneficiary of the Sino-US rivalry and the leading exporter to the United States—has also maintained good

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<sup>13</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José María. In Various Authors, *Security and Defence in Latin America: Current Opportunities for Cooperation*. CESEDEN, November 2007, p. 26.

relations with Russia. However, all three countries condemned the invasion at the UN. Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador and Nicaragua abstained, and Venezuela did not participate due to arrears in its membership contributions. Consequently, the implementation of sanctions against Russia also encountered greater difficulties in the Western Hemisphere than in other parts of the world.

Furthermore, underlying this is the issue of the aforementioned mistrust that Latin American governments feel towards the US, its presence and its intentions, regardless of their political leanings. This sometimes led to irrational responses, in that they were inconsistent both with the actual US policy to which they were reacting and with their own interests. In addition to the above, the hegemonic nature of US policy no longer corresponded to the country's actual power, or at least to its economic power.

In light of the above, the decline of its presence in Latin America up to the geopolitical reconfiguration ushered in by the second Trump administration can be interpreted as a loss of interest, but also as a result of the decline of its global hegemony, and even as a combination of both factors; that is, as a consequence of the efficient reallocation of available resources, which assigns Latin America a less significant role. In other words, the aim was to maintain a certain degree of control over the subcontinent, linked to economic efficiency and expenditure.

Thus, finding it impossible to maintain strong hemispheric leadership, it shifted pragmatically towards soft power and conciliation. By way of example, it is worth noting that the United States, in Latin America, did not exercise leadership commensurate with its status nor provide equivalent economic support during the COVID-19 pandemic. This stands in contrast to China, which did so, for instance, through extensive vaccine diplomacy.

Furthermore, the US did not speak with a single voice in a region that is more diverse than it appears. Having yielded to security imperatives that sidelined other actors and diverse interests (companies, universities, markets, raw materials, technologies...), these resurfaced in opposition to more tenuous and lightweight state policies, which were overshadowed by<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> KERN, Soren. *Op. cit.*

However, the geopolitical retreat of the second Trump administration has once again prioritised hemispheric policies. At this point, it is worth noting that President McKinley (1897–1901) has been revived for this political discourse. He too came to power using an innovative publicity strategy and with the backing of the country's economic elites; he also implemented a tariff policy (the McKinley Tariff); and pursued an expansionist policy that led to war with Spain, and with it the independence of Cuba—over which he assumed commercial control—the cession of Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines (with 250,000 deaths in the ensuing war of conquest) and the incorporation of Hawaii into the Union, thus transforming the United States into a global power.

In this vein, President Trump's second term, aside from the intervention in Venezuela with a 19th-century flavour, the use of tariffs or the appointment of a Secretary of State of Hispanic origin, has been characterised by his statements on Canada, Greenland, interventions to curb drug traffickers or his proposal to rename the Gulf of Mexico.

This, coupled with what he has termed the 'Trump corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine in his 2025 National Security Strategy, amounts to an acknowledgement of his retreat within his own hemisphere, signalled by the use of force in Venezuela and the closure of its airspace (which would constitute an act of war in classical diplomacy). This withdrawal is the result of his renunciation of a global leadership that left Latin America in its wake, in order to focus, pragmatically and without further ado, on his own hemisphere.

It also highlights the weakening of ties with Europe, which is losing its leading role in the allocation of resources, given the reduced focus on global issues. This withdrawal or repositioning represents a medium-term commitment to a world divided into spheres of influence, which would result in the United States exercising control over its own hemisphere, from Greenland. And this involves the expulsion of China from the region, supported by a new shift to the right (Honduras, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia and, predictably, Colombia) in global ideological positions.

In this context, in March 2026, the United States launched the 'Shield of the Americas' initiative, through which it aims to simultaneously combat the cartels and counter Chinese influence in Latin America. This brings together 12 countries, including Bolivia, Argentina, El Salvador, Chile and Ecuador, but excludes countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela and Guatemala.

### Trade relations. China

The region has traditionally been closely linked to US security, but has ultimately become a theatre of geo-economic and geopolitical confrontation with China. And not just China: other countries, such as India, have increased their presence in the region. Likewise, middle powers such as Turkey (a strategic partner of Bolivarian Venezuela, which allowed it to circumvent sanctions) and Iran (remember HispanTV) are extending their influence there as part of their multidimensional policy. Thus, countries seeking an alternative world order, such as Venezuela—subject to sanctions and rich in oil—have or have had significant Russian, Chinese, Turkish<sup>15</sup>, Iranian and Indian interests.

In short, China has become Latin America’s second-largest trading partner and South America’s largest, displacing the EU and challenging the Monroe Doctrine itself, by contesting the United States’ own backyard, with all the symbolism that entails. Given that the main confrontation is taking place in China’s maritime sphere, the country’s presence in Latin America, in geo-economic terms, once again echoes the Second Punic War. Consequently, the terms offered to Latin American countries are more generous than those offered elsewhere.

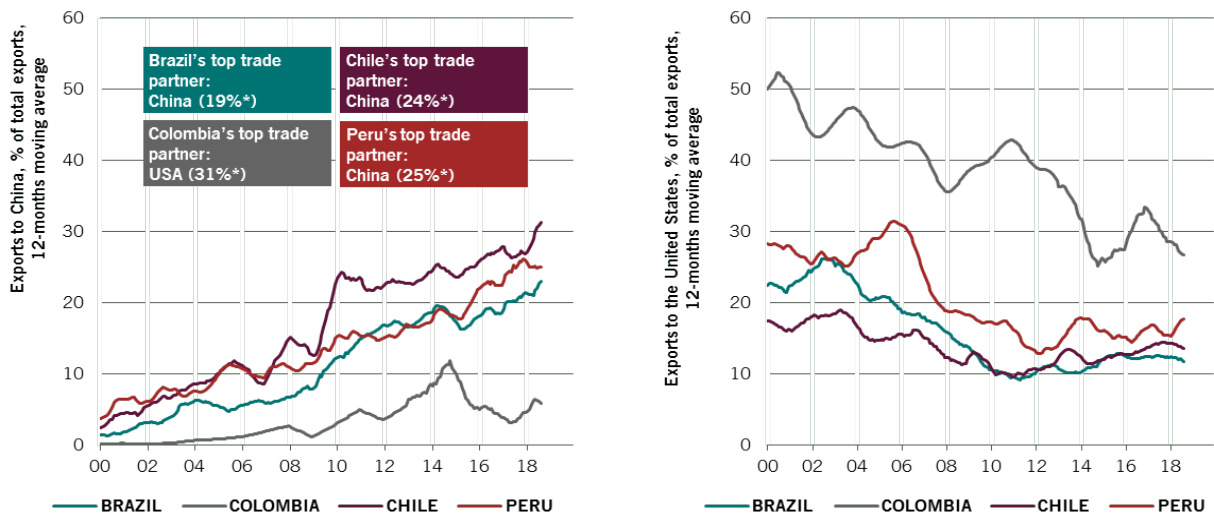


Figure. Exports to China and the United States from Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Peru.  
 Source: <https://gentosha-go.com/articles/-/19750>

In its 2023 annual report, ECLAC highlighted how trade in goods between Latin America and China had increased 35-fold between 2000 and 2022, whilst the region’s total trade

<sup>15</sup> In 2018, Turkey had 17 embassies in Latin America. Its imports from the region rose from \$3.5 billion in 2010 to \$8.5 billion in 2018, whilst its exports reached \$3.2 billion.

with the rest of the world increased only fourfold, and highlighted how bilateral trade between Latin America and China in 2000 barely exceeded 14 billion dollars, compared to nearly 500 billion dollars in 2022.

The World Economic Forum went even further, forecasting that trade will double by 2035 to exceed 700 billion. Whereas two decades ago the United States was the main trading partner of nine of the twelve South American countries, China has now overtaken it, except – until 2023 – in Ecuador, Colombia (which has announced its accession to the Belt and Road Initiative) and Paraguay. This is despite the fact that *'friendshoring'* – the US response to the Chinese challenge – is reducing, or even reversing, the trend.

Twenty-one Latin American countries had joined the BRI (President Milei has changed his position on this, as has the aforementioned inclusion of Colombia in 2023) by 2022, even though the United States remained the region's largest trading partner. Notable countries include Brazil, Chile and Peru, but also Argentina, Venezuela and Mexico. Latin America is the largest recipient of Chinese investment outside Asia, where it surpasses Europe, Africa, Oceania and North America with 10.8%. Chinese direct investment in Argentina accounted for 22% of total foreign investment, in Brazil 11% and in Peru 9%. Similarly, the percentage of exports destined for Beijing was 39% from Chile, 36% from Peru and 27% from Brazil.

Their interest lies in raw materials. And, in addition to the countries in the area known as the lithium triangle—Argentina, Bolivia and Chile—in the Andean region, where 85% of the world's reserves of this material are found, the region also has significant deposits of copper, iron and zinc, which are sought after for Chinese industrial production, not to mention Venezuelan oil, which has been a bad experience. But, moreover, it reduces production costs by setting up factories in the region and gains ground in terms of global control and governance.

Between 2005 and 2020, cumulative loans amounted to over 137 billion, with Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador and Argentina being the main recipients. As for China's investments in the region, these amounted to 140 billion between 2005 and 2021, of which 64 billion went to Brazil — its second-largest trading partner after Mexico — and 25 billion to Peru. It is worth

noting here the investments in infrastructure, with projects valued at 66 billion between 2005 and 2021, of which 51% correspond to energy projects and 29% to transport<sup>16</sup>.

In 2021, neither the pandemic nor the global supply chain crisis could halt the exponential growth of trade between China and Latin America, which increased by 41.1% compared to 2020, reaching \$451.591 billion. Exports to China amounted to \$222.582 billion—an increase of 31.4%—and imports to \$229.009 billion, an increase of 52%<sup>17</sup>.

And this is despite the fact that in 2020 the region experienced its worst economic downturn in a century, with a fall in regional GDP of almost 8%, accompanied by a 7% rise in poverty. This left almost four in ten Latin Americans in a vulnerable situation, a situation that has proved difficult to reverse.



Figure. China's influence in the region.

Sources: 1. *Geopolitical futures*. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/latin-americas-5g-dilemma/?nowprocket=1> 2. *Perfil*. <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/internacional/china-pisa-fuerte-en-america-latina-y-compite-con-EE.UU.phtml>

China has been the leading trading partner of Brazil, Chile, Peru, Uruguay and Argentina (in 2024, following President Milei's adjustments, the third), and has free trade agreements with Chile, Costa Rica and Peru. It began talks with Ecuador in 2022 in this regard. Its trade relations are, moreover — and as always — asymmetrical in terms of the products traded. China imports natural resources—minerals (35%), soya (17%), mineral fuels (12%), meat

<sup>16</sup> ZAPATA, Sandra. 'Chinese boom and Russian decline in Latin America', *Política Exterior*. 19 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/auge-chino-y-caida-rusa-en-america-latina/>

<sup>17</sup> HURTADO, Jorge. "Trade between Latin America and China grows at an unprecedented rate, experts call for 'caution'", *France 24*. 19 February 2022. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/es/programas/economía/20220219-china-america-latina-comercio-economia>



(7%) and copper (6%)—whilst its exports are concentrated on industrial products<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, it is investing heavily in Mexico, which has a free trade agreement with the US, and is one of the major beneficiaries of its confrontation with the US.

China's presence has affected intra-regional trade. For instance, Brazil has ceased to be the largest source of goods imported by Argentina, and Argentina is no longer the main source of Paraguay's imports, which have been replaced by the Chinese market<sup>19</sup>. The strong economic support provided by the Trump administration to Argentina in 2025 has given it breathing space in its relationship with China.

As occurred in Africa, several of these New Silk Road projects have generated large trade deficits, enabling China to take control of strategic infrastructure projects it had previously financed. Political repercussions and corollaries also follow from this. For example, only eight countries in Latin America and the Caribbean recognise Taiwan. Panama, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador shifted their recognition in favour of the People's Republic of China between 2017 and 2018, and Nicaragua did so in 2021<sup>20</sup>. It is also worth noting the change in position of Argentine President Milei, who in 2024 abandoned his ideological principles.

This circle is closed in terms of soft power through the branches of the Confucius Institute, a cultural entity which nevertheless has the capacity to influence public opinion. In 2021, there were forty-four branches spread across twenty-one countries.

Meanwhile, the United States' trade with the region in 2019 stood at \$885.1 billion, whilst foreign direct investment (FDI) amounted to \$256.1 billion. US exports of goods to Latin America amounted to \$418.2 billion in 2019, accounting for 16.7% of the country's total exports that year. However, these are concentrated in Central America and the Caribbean and decline in South America, to a greater extent the further south one goes, as shown in the attached graph. Its second largest trading partner, after Mexico, is Brazil.

Special mention should be made of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which came into force in July 2020 to replace the North American Free Trade

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<sup>18</sup> ZAPATA, Sandra. *Op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> "China is investing more and more and trading with Latin America" | Chinese Policy Observatory [OPCh] ([politica-china.org](http://politica-china.org)).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Agreement (NAFTA)<sup>21</sup> and which has been described as a mistake by President Trump, who wishes to scrap it. However, it expires in 2036, although it includes a provision for periodic review.

There are infrastructure projects which, due to their scale and strategic importance for the region, deserve special mention. This is the case of the port of Chancay, located 75 kilometres from Lima, which came into service in 2022 following an investment of 3 billion dollars. This is the first Chinese logistics hub on the Pacific coast of Latin America and the only one in the region operated by the state-owned shipping company COSCO, in a similar way to Piraeus, which serves as its gateway to the Mediterranean. It is also worth mentioning the presence of a space station in Argentina, whose operation remains opaque. And although it is well known that President Milei would like a change of model in relations, the country's debt to China limits his options.

The case of Mexico, already mentioned, is unique due to its proximity to the United States. Its trade deficit with China in 2023 exceeded \$104 billion. The states of Sonora, Mexico City and Puebla are the largest exporters to China, whilst the main destinations for Chinese imports are Chihuahua and Jalisco. Chinese investment in the country had doubled in the ten years prior to 2024. Consequently, President Trump threatened sanctions to prevent the country from benefiting from *'friendshoring'* whilst simultaneously serving as a gateway for Chinese goods. In any case, the tariffs have affected it far less than feared.

For its part, the EU is Latin America's third-largest trading partner. Furthermore, the EU's soft power and its appeal to countries in the region must be considered. Consequently, and with the aim of regaining the initiative, the EU launched the *Global Gateway* programme, with a budget of \$50.6 billion until 2027 and focused on sectors such as health, education and technology.

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<sup>21</sup> DE LA FUENTE, Erich; ROMERO, Alejandro and LABRY, Khy. "The relationship between the United States and Latin America: what to expect from the Biden Administration", *Llorente y Cuenca*. 25 March 2021. Available at: <https://ideas.llorenteycuena.com/2021/03/la-relacion-entre-estados-unidos-y-latinoamerica-que-esperar-de-la-administracion-biden/>

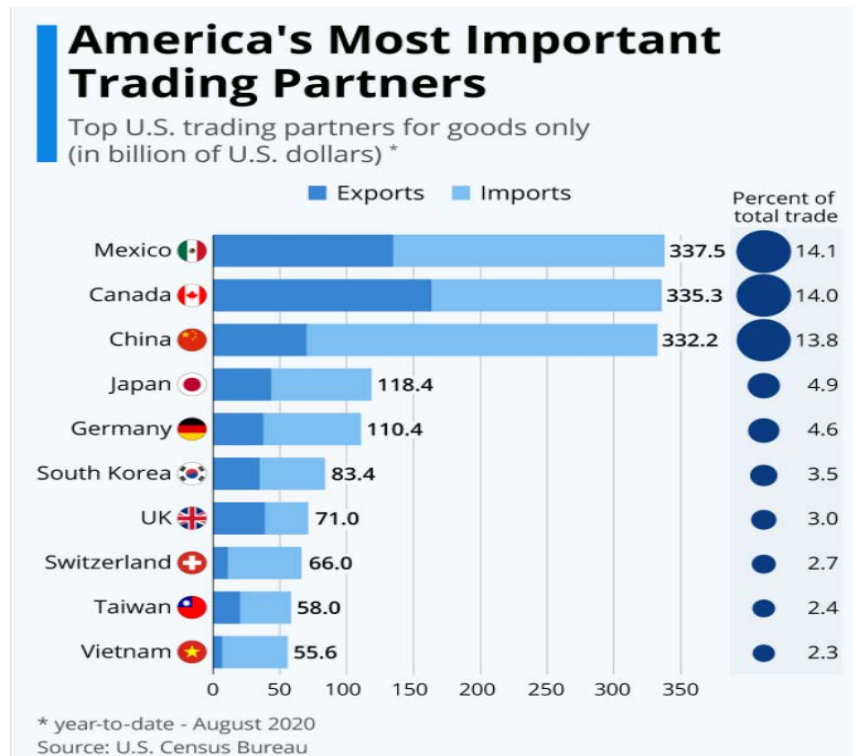


Figure. Main trading partners of the United States.  
 Source: Statista. <https://www.statista.com/chart/10942/top-us-trading-partners-for-goods/>

It is worth noting the agreement reached between the EU and MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) in 2026, which represents a geopolitical commitment to the West, although countries such as France and sectors such as agriculture present challenges. In any case, the MERCOSUR-EU area comprises 700 million people and a market worth 20 trillion euros, whilst trade totals 110 billion euros, of which 56 billion euros correspond to exports to Latin American countries and 54 billion to imports. This agreement represents an alternative response to both China and President Trump’s protectionist policies. However, the distribution of its costs and benefits across sectors is a source of social contention within Europe.

## Migration

The problem posed by the decoupling of population and territory has historically been addressed in various ways. Migration processes (excluding tourism and skilled labour) provide an outlet for this surplus of human capital, thereby alleviating the pressure on the structures of the countries of origin and enabling the repatriation of remittances and

knowledge, which contribute to the country's development and a rebalancing of resource distribution. The wealth of host societies and their need for labour act as pull factors and reinforce this effect.

To this undoubtedly positive fact are added many others that act as driving forces of migratory processes, such as organisational and economic management problems, deficiencies in welfare provision (health, education, housing, training and basic social security), situations of war or chronic violence, tribal conflicts... Alongside these, there are others, such as differences in levels of development and the demands of societies in the North. The problems are cumulative, as we are dealing with movements of a mixed nature in terms of their origin, involving people in vulnerable situations and which, in part, have served to meet a temporary demand.

But international migration is not the only form of migration, nor even the most significant. Authors such as Hobsbawm<sup>22</sup> have downplayed the importance, at present, of this movement, which accounts for 4% of the world's population. In 1950, the urban population stood at 26%; by 2006, it had risen to around 48%. Only two of the eighteen cities with over ten million inhabitants are located in Europe or the US<sup>23</sup>.

In the case of Latin America, in 2020, 43 million people from the region were living outside their countries of birth, accounting for 15% of the world's migrants and making the region the leading source of migrants. However, their destinations depend on the specific circumstances of their countries of origin<sup>24</sup>. Not all of them are the same. A significant proportion are economic migrants moving in search of job opportunities. Many others, Haitians and some Central Americans, are fleeing economic, political, social and climate crises. Thus, there are no fewer than 7.2 million Venezuelans spread across Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile and Brazil.

All things considered, Latin American countries are melting pots of many cultures. Colombia, for example, welcomed many Lebanese and Turks in the 19th century. Some integrated fully into the population, although they can still be recognised by their

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<sup>22</sup> HOBBSAWM, Eric. *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> SALAZAR-XIRINACHS, José Manuel. 'Migration in Latin America and the Caribbean: The rule of rights and sustainable development', *El País newspaper*. 13 June 2023. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-06-13/migracion-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe-el-imperativo-de-los-derechos-y-el-desarrollo-sostenible.html>

surnames. Understanding these movements will bring benefits for migrants, but also for host communities.

In short, two focal points stand out in the region: until the arrival of President Trump, the so-called Darien Gap, and the Colchane crossing in the Chilean-Bolivian highlands.

The Darien was the crossing point for northbound flows, where crossings in 2022 totalled 250,000 people – double the previous year's figure – and in 2023, more than 500,000 people, again double the previous year's figure. However, six months after his arrival, President Trump managed to halt these flows.

We are looking at a dense jungle covering more than 5,000 square kilometres that separates Colombia from Panama and which, on a journey lasting between three and fifteen days, exposes travellers not only to challenging natural conditions but also to local criminal gangs. And it was not only migrants from neighbouring countries who crossed it, but also others from places as far afield as China, India, Afghanistan, Cameroon, Somalia and Bangladesh.

The origin of the United States is rooted in emigration and its contribution to the formation of a cultural melting pot in a land of opportunities. Immigration forms a substantial part of its national mythology. The main regions of origin for migrants in North America are Latin America and the Caribbean (25.4 million, 43.2% of the total migrant population), followed by Asia (17.55 million, 29.9%), Europe (6.87 million, 11.7%) and Africa (3.27 million, 5.6%). The population of the United States stood at 340 million in 2024.

This figure is the result of exponential growth. In the last quarter of the 20th century, the number of first-generation immigrants quadrupled. Their numbers rose from 9.6 million in 1970 to approximately 38 million in 2007. At that time, there were some 11.1 million illegal immigrants in the United States (31% of the total), 11.8 million legal residents (33%), 11.5 million naturalised citizens (32%) and 1.3 million legal temporary residents (4%)<sup>25</sup>. With more than 14 million immigrants, both legal and illegal, the 1990s have so far been the decade with the highest levels of immigration in the history of the United States.

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<sup>25</sup> MEISSNER, Doris, *et al. Immigration and the Future of the United States: A New Chapter*. Migration Policy Institute, 2006.

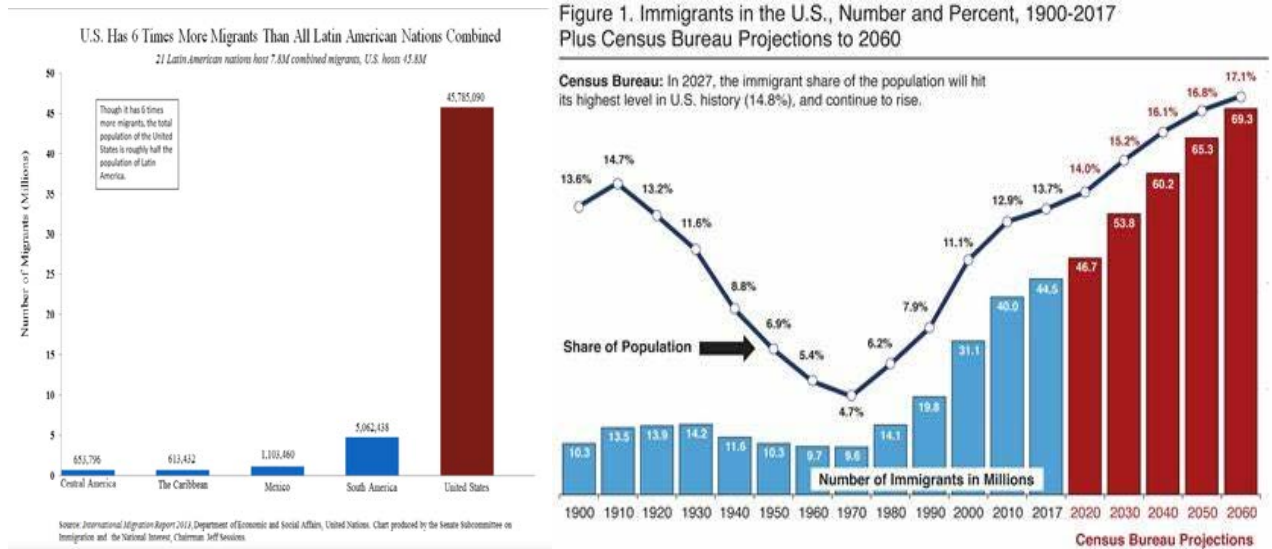


Figure. Immigration to the United States.

Source: 1. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/sessions-us-has-6-times-as-many-immigrants-as-latin-america-48m-vs-7m> 2. <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=2223>

Between 2000 and 2018, some 20 million immigrants arrived in the United States, mostly from Central America and Latin America as a whole, bringing the total to 44.7 million in 2018. Some sources estimate the total number of legal and illegal immigrants received by the United States each year during this period at 1.8 million, more than 600,000 of whom were undocumented.

In 2018, a new form of mass migration emerged: migrant caravans. In one of the first episodes, thousands of Central American migrants travelled on foot from San Pedro Sula, in Honduras, to the United States. Subsequently, caravans entered Mexico, with numbers exceeding 80,000 migrants.

The problem worsened to the point of becoming a crisis. By way of example, within a year up to September 2021, 608,000 Mexicans, 309,000 Hondurans, 279,000 Guatemalans and 96,000 Salvadorans were detained by US border authorities. A further 367,000 Central American migrants were also detained<sup>26</sup>. The figure continued to rise, fuelling fears of a shift in the cultural fabric, which manifests itself in theories such as the ‘Great Replacement’.

<sup>26</sup> BEAUREGARD, Luis Pablo. “Migration breaks all records in the United States in the first months of the Biden administration”, *El País*. 21 October 2021. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-10-20/la-migracion-rompe-todos-los-records-en-estados-unidos-en-los-primeros-meses-de-la-administracion-biden.html>

Officially, in 2025 there were around 11 million undocumented migrants in the United States. However, President Trump has made anti-immigration policy a central plank of his agenda, prioritising it politically and expressing it symbolically. He has also stated his intention to deport up to 25 million illegal immigrants, as well as to transfer those accused of crimes to Guantánamo or to prisons in El Salvador.

Through high-profile statements and actions, he seeks to discourage emigration to the United States and thereby satisfy his supporters, which has sparked significant social backlash in his own country, such as that seen following the events in Minnesota in 2026.

Emigration certainly brings considerable benefits to the United States—it boosts productivity and competitiveness and stimulates the economy, with virtually no social costs—but it also brings with it significant challenges. Addressing these challenges involves tackling illegal immigration at source, as well as the social integration of these groups, the effects on the native population, security issues, crime, xenophobia...

Managing migration on the current scale is a major economic, social and security challenge. Undoubtedly, the fact that the United States, through its policies towards China, has made Mexico its main trading partner has been a step in the right direction.

Illegal migration also entails an additional problem. Minor trafficking and offences, which often committed by marginalised groups in environments of poverty and inequality, can contribute to the trivialisation of crime and a disregard for the law. The coexistence of legal and illegal activities becomes a training ground that breaks down the barriers between them.

There is a strong link to drug and human trafficking, as well as with other crimes such as extortion, since these rely on the same means and communication channels within the framework of a 'normalised' black market and an atmosphere of impunity (real or perceived). A regional example would be *La Bestia*, a network of freight railways covering Central America which, amongst its 'cargo', also transports illegal migrants and drugs right up to the US border under the 'protection' of the maras.

The tightening of US immigration policies during the first Trump era was highly contested. Thus, measures such as Title 42 — a public health restriction stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, in force until 2023 — enabled, during the Biden presidency, the prevention of the entry of 1.7 million migrants at the Mexican border. Meanwhile, organisations such

as Amnesty International and Médecins Sans Frontières had already denounced in 2022 the separation of 8,000 families as a result of abusive practices and cruel treatment.

The second Trump administration has, as noted, been far more radical in the implementation of anti-immigration measures, beginning with a wide-ranging and sensationalist media campaign. Upon taking office, it issued 42 executive orders relating to migration, with a dual purpose: to prevent the entry of new migrants and to deport undocumented immigrants.

To prevent access, the Armed Forces have been deployed; a ‘border emergency’ has been declared; the threat of tariffs has been used to encourage cooperation from transit countries (which has succeeded in sealing off the Darien Gap), and the humanitarian access programme for people from Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti and Nicaragua has been suspended... Furthermore, it has subjected immigrants to intense public harassment: the application of an 18th-century law intended for times of war, deportations to Salvadoran prisons, restrictions on access to healthcare and the withholding of federal funds for their care.

It should also be noted, as the *2025 Political Risk Report on Latin America* points out, that cartels exploit migration as a means of recruiting people for human trafficking. According to the ILO, in 2025 there were 49.6 million people worldwide subjected to a form of modern slavery, of whom 54% were women and girls. In Latin America, 80% were also women and girls, of whom 50% were sexually exploited and 38% subjected to forced labour.

Solving this problem requires addressing others beyond US borders that act as driving factors. We thus return to issues of development, inequality, organised crime, corruption and violence, which affect Central America as a whole.

Ultimately, the solution would involve facilitating the comprehensive development of the continent, and particularly of Central America. The proposals put forward by the US administration, both under Trump’s ‘*friendshoring*’ policy and during Biden’s term, to promote employment and development in the region through economic investment, were appropriate. The issue is that they require sustained effort, as they entail both economic and cultural change.

We are facing an ‘inter-regional’ problem, and this approach adds even more difficulties



to the conceptualisation of security. The reinforcement of the border with Guatemala, undertaken by Mexican President López Obrador in response, fits into this logic. Conversely, and as a counterbalance, Latin America receives significant remittances, which are fundamental to its economic development. In 2022, the World Bank estimated these at 140 billion. This represents 20% of the GDP of countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica and Nicaragua.

### Evangelical movements

Globalisation, like any process of exchange, produces feedback and interactions. Cultural influences can be situated within this context, and the central axis of culture is religion. Emigration is provoking a movement towards Catholicisation in the United States, whose Founding Fathers were the Mayflower pilgrims. Conversely, it has favoured the expansion of evangelical movements in Latin America.

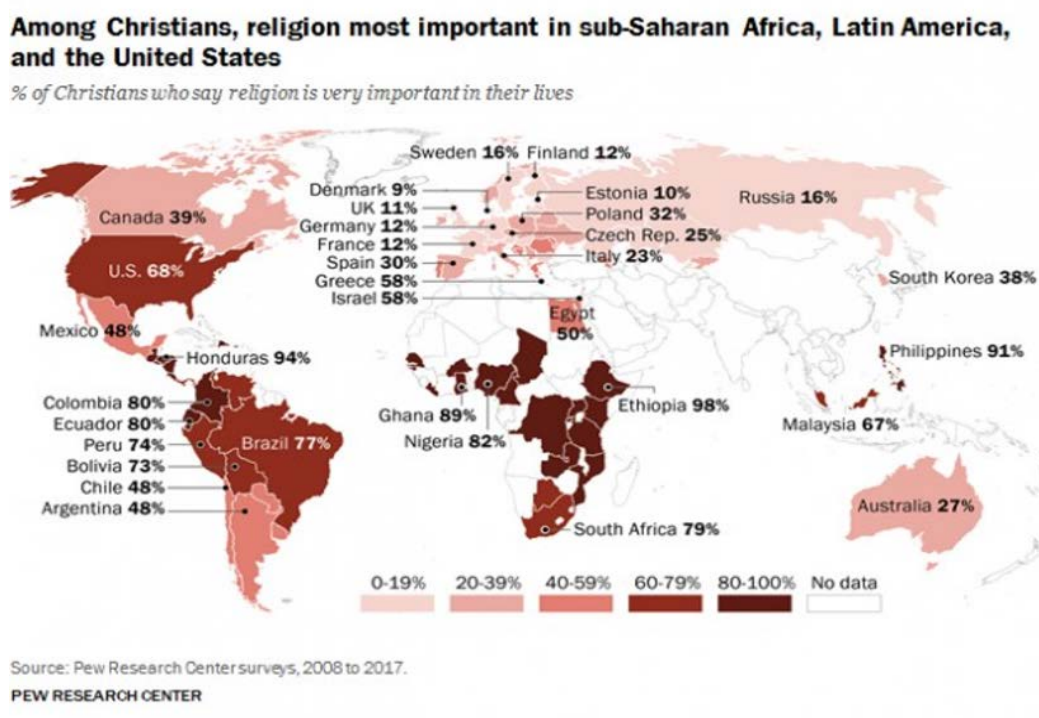


Figure. Importance of religion by country.  
 Source: Pew Research Center. [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)

Religion is decisive on the continent. The *Bible Belt* refers to a vast region of the United States where evangelical Christianity is deeply rooted and linked to conservative positions. Indeed, Chesterton noted that “the United States is the only country in the world

founded on a creed. That creed appears with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence.”

Thus, during the War of Independence, five out of every six Americans were Calvinists, mostly Puritans and Presbyterians. For this reason, England viewed this movement as a kind of ‘Presbyterian rebellion’. The facts bore out this perception; during the Battle of Yorktown, all but one of the colonels in the American army were Presbyterians<sup>27</sup> .

For its part, Catholicism forms part of the social and national identity of quite a few countries. Huntington argued that the problem of Catholicism in the United States—that is, the integration of Catholics—had been resolved by making them culturally Protestant, whilst they remained Catholic in doctrine.

Some 55,000 Protestant churches have been identified. This fragmentation, coupled with the superficiality and lack of religious preparation among the congregation, facilitates emotional manipulation by the media and politics. However, with the new millennium, the so-called evangelical movements are having a significant impact in Latin America, representing a veritable boom.

By “evangelicals” we mean the non-Catholic Christian movements in the region that go beyond the framework of doctrinal Protestantism, although they are situated within Western Christianity. Their success is not so much a product of their own influence as of the actual secularisation of societies, as well as their anarchic, postmodern and nihilistic nature. This phenomenon varies by country and region.

The first Protestant missionaries, who arrived in Latin America in the 1870s, were mostly Presbyterians and Methodists, and they opened medical centres and schools. In the United States, it was considered necessary to overcome the colonial order by introducing their own values into the region, in a sort of hybrid corollary between the Monroe Doctrine and Weberian-style Protestant supremacism.

However, the effort was inconsistent and, from the 1930s and 1940s onwards, most missionaries confined themselves to opening churches, did not carry out significant social work, and, furthermore, faced opposition from Catholic-led governments, which restricted their activities. These groups were a sort of ‘immigrant Protestantism’ or ‘ethnic churches’:

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<sup>27</sup> GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, Andrés. ‘The American Religion of Winning and the North American Civil Religion’.

German Lutheran, Anglican or Methodist groups and Mennonite communities that did not integrate into local communities<sup>28</sup> .

During the Cold War, attempts were made to supplant the Catholic Church with other Christian denominations. The aim was, at the very least, to weaken the so-called “popular Catholic Church” in Latin America – a blend of Spanish and Portuguese Catholic traditions with indigenous and African rites and beliefs – particularly in Brazil and the West Indies. To achieve this policy, the US allocated millions of dollars to the construction of evangelical churches and the deployment of “televangelists”, who were tasked with organising massive regional evangelisation campaigns<sup>29</sup> .

From the 1970s onwards, these were replaced once again by ‘missionary Protestantism’ and Pentecostalism, an American Protestant renewal movement that emphasises a direct and personal relationship with God and even the belief in miracles. These movements offer a substitute society that conforms to a familiar model, albeit a renewed one. The explosion of Pentecostalism in Latin America occurred when it shed its American characteristics, adapting to local patterns<sup>30</sup> .

Uncontrolled urbanisation entrenched the marginalisation and helplessness of many families, at a time when the Catholic Church was politicised and lacked the material and human resources to cater for the multitudes beginning to populate the urban peripheries—a void that was skilfully filled by evangelical pastors. To this must be added the growing influence of the mass media, which has facilitated citizens’ access to new ideas and beliefs, as well as the emotionality, empathy and adaptability of Protestantism compared to the rigorous and doctrinal nature of the Catholic Church.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the size of evangelical churches was limited. However, since then, and coinciding with the social breakdown caused by urbanisation and migration from the countryside to the city, worship began to grow among the poorest sectors and the struggle for congregants intensified. Thus, in response to the progressive commitment to a “liberation theology”, these movements embraced a “prosperity theology”<sup>31</sup> .

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<sup>28</sup> LUIZ JUNGBLUT, Aitor. “Being an Evangelical in Latin America”, *NUSO* no. 260. Nov.–Dec. 2015.

<https://nuso.org/articulo/ser-evangelico-en-america-latina/>

<sup>29</sup> PASTOR GÓMEZ, María Luisa. *Evangelism in Latin America: A Growing Force. The Case of Brazil*. IEEE Analysis Paper 07/2018.

<sup>30</sup> LUIZ JUNGBLUT, Aitor. *Op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> PASTOR GÓMEZ, María Luisa. *Op. cit.*

The Prosperity Gospel has also been referred to as “*The American Religion of Winning.*” It has its roots in the Puritan work ethic, but its current, radical interpretation is a new development. From this perspective, a new covenant is established between the believer and God, whereby God undertakes to bless the faithful with material success. Many Americans instinctively identify with this line of thinking<sup>32</sup>.

Evangelical movements, especially so-called neo-Pentecostal ones, engage more with new technologies and become involved in social issues. Their messages adapt to Latin American needs and cultural patterns, generating hybrid forms of religiosity by combining Latin American popular Catholicism with imported Protestantism. Likewise, they propose a sort of second Reformation in what was once the tropical paradise of Catholicism<sup>33</sup>. The election of Popes Francis and Leo XIV may be partly due to the need to respond to this challenge, as well as to the shift of Catholicism’s geopolitical centre towards the Americas.

Evangelical Christianity and Pentecostalism are characterised by popular devotion, an emphasis on charisms, healing practices and the development of mutual aid networks, all of which are scarce in traditional Catholic parishes. Evangelical churches guarantee their believers a kind of protection against the evils plaguing the region. God thus offers miracles and prosperity to those who believe in Him<sup>34</sup>.

So many contradictions have given rise to figures such as narco-evangelicals or narco-Pentecostals (whose number will surpass that of Brazilian Catholics by the end of the century), bringing together intellectually incompatible terms but also pointing to the existence of a group culture—the Third Capital Command (TCP), known for its radical evangelicalism, marks its caches with a Star of David—that acts as a means of legitimisation and social control. This aligns with Santería and the cult of Santa Muerte, both widespread among Central American drug traffickers.

The evangelical vote is significant in electoral processes and fuels political polarisation. Religious leaders, hand in hand with media empires, have become political figures of reference, linked in quite a few countries to conservative sectors. Their importance in the election of President Bolsonaro in Brazil or López Obrador in Mexico is well known.

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<sup>32</sup> GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, Andrés. ‘The American Religion of Winning and the North American Civil Religion’.

<sup>33</sup> LUIZ JUNGBLUT, Aitor. ‘Being an Evangelical in Latin America’. *Op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> PASTOR GÓMEZ, María Luisa. *Op. cit.*

However, the power of evangelicalism had already manifested itself in the referendum on the peace agreements with the FARC in Colombia, held in October 2016, which revealed an emerging influence.

It should be noted that the rise of evangelical movements, anticipated by President Trump himself, aligns with the potential repositioning of the United States in the subcontinent and with the weight of religious issues on its political agenda.

<b>Religious Affiliations of Latin Americans</b>				
	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>Unaffiliated</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Predominantly Catholic</b>				
Paraguay	89%	7%	1%	2%
Mexico	81	9	7	4
Colombia	79	13	6	2
Ecuador	79	13	5	3
Bolivia	77	16	4	3
Peru	76	17	4	3
Venezuela	73	17	7	4
Argentina	71	15	11	3
Panama	70	19	7	4
<b>Majority Catholic</b>				
Chile	64	17	16	3
Costa Rica	62	25	9	4
Brazil	61	26	8	5
Dominican Rep.	57	23	18	2
Puerto Rico	56	33	8	2
<b>U.S. Hispanics</b>	55	22	18	5
<b>Half Catholic</b>				
El Salvador	50	36	12	3
Guatemala	50	41	6	3
Nicaragua	50	40	7	4
<b>Less than half Catholic</b>				
Honduras	46	41	10	2
Uruguay	42	15	37	6
<b>Regional total*</b>	69	19	8	4
<small>(adjusting for each country's population size)</small>				
QCURREL				
<small>*Regional total does not include U.S. Hispanics.</small>				
<small>Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.</small>				
<b>PEW RESEARCH CENTER</b>				

Figure. Religious affiliation in Latin America.  
 Source: *Pew Research Center*. [twitter.com / pewresearch/status/532885614635413505](https://twitter.com/pewresearch/status/532885614635413505)

## Conclusions

Latin America represents a space united by language, but one which, upon closer inspection, reveals itself to be deeply rich and diverse. Nevertheless, due to its internal

problems, it occupies a strategic semi-periphery: its voice, muted, has been absent from the major issues of international relations, despite its wealth. However, the second Trump Administration has restored its prominence, if indeed it ever had it.

That said, over the past two decades there have been some significant changes, due primarily to the progress made in both the democratisation of the region and regional and sub-regional integration processes, which have also advanced, though not as much as might be desired. These latter processes need to become more credible, at least among those who lead them.

It is worth highlighting China's rise in Latin America, which lies at the root of the new geopolitical situation. China is not only the main trading partner of around ten countries but has also significantly increased its investment in various strategic sectors, such as natural resources, infrastructure and telecommunications. This increased Chinese presence takes place in a context of greater strategic confrontation with the United States. Moreover, this confrontation occurs in its backyard, meaning the rivalry only deepens as it shifts to an area of particular symbolism and sensitivity for the latter country.

Nevertheless, its presentation as the dominant power in a hemispheric context enables the United States to act as the leading power in the region, which is now presented as its sphere of influence or dominance. However, US leadership had weakened in the context of globalisation and had been reduced to a role of influence: in practice, a guiding and mediating role, which was stronger the greater the territorial proximity.

This occurred while the memory of US interventionism persisted—and still persists—in the collective memory. This translates into a deep mistrust on the part of both Latin American societies and governments—regardless of political orientation—which has hindered the development of a hemispheric policy, that is, one concerning the continent as a whole. The effects of the Trump Administration's interventionism and its return to 19th-century models remain to be seen.

In its relations with the region, the United States seeks to safeguard its vital interests and the stability of its strategic environment, regardless of Latin America's geopolitical weight within the global system. The constant presence and enduring influence in the region

highlight it as a key area for the United States<sup>35</sup> and provide a clear explanation for the withdrawal undertaken by the Trump administration.

Three main problems face the United States: a loss of economic influence in the region—following the loss of political influence—organised crime, and mass migration. All three are “intermestic” problems and will require greater US commitment: an economic commitment, not merely a military one.

Proposals to promote economic development in Latin America represent steps in the right direction, but this commitment must be sustained and long-term, capable—through example and favourable outcomes in the region’s financial and political progress—of countering anti-Western narratives, which are so convenient for both opportunistic populists and illiberal powers, as they serve to widen the cracks in the legitimacy of democracy and the rule of law.

The United States used to control Latin America by controlling the world and keeping it in its sphere of influence. The fact that new players have established themselves in this region thus demonstrates a loss of power at the global level, as evidenced by the postponement of the announced pivot to the Pacific.

In any case, as it withdraws and contracts geopolitically, Latin America remains key to the United States: it is its *hinterland*. It is to be expected that, beyond mere posturing, it will regain an effective presence, given that the vacuum it has left behind had been filled by other actors whom it now seeks to expel; and it cannot do so without also occupying their space. And this is without even considering the significant reserves of natural and energy resources at its disposal.

President Trump’s second term has placed Latin America at the top of his political agenda, which *effectively* means diverting resources from other areas to facilitate this repositioning. Tariffs and the rift with Europe may signal his relinquishment of Western leadership and ultimately bring him back to the hemisphere. However, intervention in Venezuela and the US Armed Forces’ action against drug trafficking outside national territory may resurrect old fears and ghosts, necessitating the use of the economic carrot.

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<sup>35</sup> KERN, Soren. *Op. cit.*

Nevertheless, 21st-century Latin America, with its flaws and shortcomings, possesses levels of institutional, social and economic development that it did not have in the 19th century. History does not repeat itself, however much it may rhyme. This will make it difficult for Washington to exercise the guiding role it seeks to assume in the region.

In any case, the result is that Latin America has re-entered the geopolitics of the 21st century, which is not necessarily good news for Latin Americans with whom, let us remember, Spain forms a cross-cutting community.

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